

Art Forgery and Fakes

What percentage of the art in museums would you guess are fakes? According to some estimates, it could be 20%. Particularly with old masters, it is often difficult to distinguish the authentic from the fake without extensive forensic analysis and the keen eyes of experts. Despite modern technology, the market remains riddled with forged masterpieces.

Sometimes, a painting that has been attributed to a famous painter turns out to be the work of his/her apprentice. In 2009, the Prado Museum in Madrid announced that *Colossus*, long attributed to Francisco Goya, was probably painted by his apprentice.



Colossus

Frequently, paintings originally thought to be the work of a highly regarded artist are actually the work of expert forgers who are trying to dupe museums and collectors.

Franco Modigliani, who died impoverished at the age of 35, is one of the most frequently forged artists in history. Partly because of his easily replicable style and partly because his paintings can garner extremely high prices, forging his works has been a temptation worldwide. His 1917 *Nu Couché* sold at Sotheby's in 2018 for \$157.2 million, at the time the fourth highest price paid for a piece of art at auction.

In 2017, Genoa's Ducal Palace hosted an exhibit of 21 of what were believed to be Modigliani paintings. Of the 21, 20 were determined to be fakes. The exhibit was shut down and the paintings turned over to police for investigation. Today, the investigation is ongoing. The police have said that they have identified suspects: an artist who may have forged them, two collectors, including an American who procured most of the works, the head of the organization who organized the exhibit and the curator.



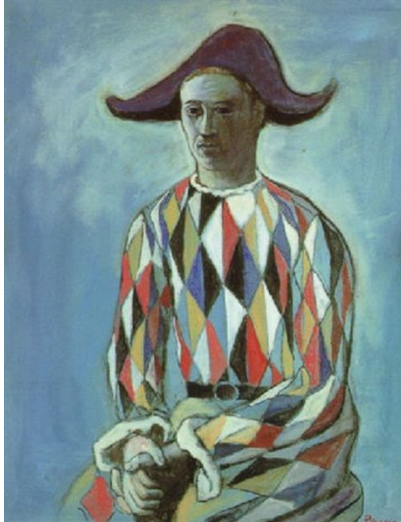
Nu Couché

One of the most famous (or infamous) forgers of all time is Elmyr de Hory (1906-1976), with over 1,000 forgeries to his name. His initial goal was to be a reputable artist, but found it was more lucrative to produce forgeries. As one means of duping collectors, he claimed to be a displaced Hungarian aristocrat selling his family's art collection. Later, to avoid suspicion, he used pseudonyms when selling his forged paintings. He was even able to enter into shady arrangements with less than scrupulous dealers to sell his output. His repertoire included Picasso, Modigliani, Matisse, Cezanne and Renoir. He was finally unmasked when one of his accomplices sold a large number of de Hory forgeries to a Texas millionaire, who discovered the fraud. In 1976, the French government finally, after years of legal wrangling, secured his extradition from Spain. He was never charged with forgery in Spain, as it could not be proven he had created any of his fakes on Spanish soil. To avoid what he feared would be an execution, de Hory committed suicide.

In 1964, de Hory told his story to author, Clifford Irving¹, who then wrote the biography, *Fake! The Story of Elmyr de Hory the Greatest Art Forger of Our Time* (available for Kindle at Amazon for \$2.99). The film, *F for Fake*, a 1973 docudrama directed by and starring Orson Welles, focuses on de Hory's story as a backdrop for a discussion of the value of art. The 88 minute film is available in its entirety on Youtube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gIVgUjj6RxU>.

¹ The same Clifford Irving perpetrated a hoax of his own, claiming to have written an "authorized biography" of the recluse, Howard Hughes. After being denounced by Hughes, Irving was sentenced to prison for his fraud. The fraud was the subject of a 2006 film, *The Hoax*, starring Richard Gere, available to watch from Cinemax.

The photo below is of a de Hory Picasso.



Harlequin, de Hory, 1969

Han Van Meegeren (1889-1947) is another famous forger. The Dutch artist, having failed as a young man to impress critics with his works (he was considered derivative), decided to take his revenge by forging the works of others. His choice of Vermeer was especially audacious in light of that Baroque artist's skill. Van Meegeren took six years to recreate the materials and technique used by Vermeer and to perfect the aging process.

Despite his criminal activities, he became a hero after World War II when it was discovered that he traded one of his fake Vermeer's to Hermann Göring in exchange for 200 Dutch paintings looted by the Nazis. However, before that happened, in 1945, he was arrested and charged with collaborating with the enemy (a crime punishable by death), as it was believed he had sold an authentic Vermeer to Göring. His defense was unique: he claimed he had given Goring a forgery, a crime in itself. As part of his defense, it was arranged that he would, under guard, create a "new" Vermeer. The charge was ultimately changed to forgery, for which Van Meegeren was found guilty and sentenced to one year in prison. In 1947, an opinion poll placed him second in popularity in the Netherlands, outranked only by the Prime Minister.

The painting below, *Christ with the Adulteress*, is the fake that was traded to Göring.



There is a short TEDtalk about Van Meegeren on Youtube entitled *The Art Forger Who Fooled the Nazis*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y5JdbuBe6SY>. There is also a 2016 biographical Dutch film (with English subtitles) available for rent (free for Prime members) on Amazon entitled *A Real Vermeer*.

John Myatt (1945-present), a British artist, committed what Scotland Yard referred to as “the biggest art fraud of the 20th century”. Myatt’s life of forgery began with painting legitimate fakes, advertising his work as “genuine fakes”, selling in 1985 for approximately 150 pounds. Then one of his regular customers, John Drewe, told him that he had been able to resell one of the fakes as an original, Myatt became an accomplice to Drewe’s fraud. Myatt began painting in the style of such artists as Matisse, Chagall and Giacometti. Drewe was able to sell the paintings to the renowned auction houses, Sotheby’s and Christies, even though the techniques have since been called amateurish. Myatt was arrested in 1995 and readily confessed. In 1999, he was convicted of fraud and was sentenced to one year in prison.

Since his release from prison, Myatt has continued to paint “genuine fakes” which have sold for upwards of 45,000 pounds. He works with law enforcement to expose fraudsters. Myatt had a television show called *Fame in the Frame* which aired in 2010/11. In this show, Myatt sat with a celebrity and painted him/her in the style of a famous artist. The photo below shows Myatt and the comedic actor, Stephen Frye, with Myatt’s portrait of Frye as Pope Innocent X. Frye has been a frequent critic of the Roman Catholic Church.



Would you be surprised if Myatt had his own website? It turns out, he is a bit of a self-promoter. If you are interested, here is the website address:

<https://www.johnmyatt.com/>

On the website, Myatt announces a film about his life. The film, entitled *Genuine Fakes*, is supposed to be released this year. According to a tidbit in the *London Daily Telegraph*, the film will feature a Myatt version of a Van Meegeren version of a Vermeer.

I will end this with a philosophical question... Can art fakes be considered real art? I will not offer an opinion on this subject, but would be interested in your views. I will just say that there certainly is an ongoing philosophical debate on the subject (e.g., inspiration vs technical skill). There is, in fact, a museum in Vienna, *The Museum of Art Fakes*. Just this year, Elmyr de Hory’s works were exhibited at the Hillstrom Museum of Art at Gustavus Adolphus College.